

Bill Harris

(b. 1941)

A graduate of Wayne State University in Michigan, Bill Harris has been an associate professor in the English department there since 1993. He was previously a curator at the Museum of African American History, and he has also worked for the New Federal Theater and Jazzmobile, both in New York City. The author of numerous plays that have seen over fifty productions, Harris published his first play in book form, **Stories About the Old Days**, in 1990. Other examples of his work can be found in **Roots and Blossoms: African American Plays for Today** (1991), which features the play **Up and Gone Again**, and in **New Plays for the Black Theatre** (1989), which showcases **Every Goodbye Ain't Gone**. Harris has also written and produced **Trick the Devil**, **Slave Narrative**, **The Society of Men**, and **No Use Crying**, among others. A poet, music critic, and essayist as well, Harris has been published in various publications including **Callaloo**, **Detroit Free Press Magazine**, **Black Scholar**, **Jazz Masters Journal**, and **Ontario Review**. The recipient of a Paul Robeson Cultural Arts Award and a United Black Artists Award, he has been awarded grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation, and the Metropolitan Life Foundation.

He Who Endures

Characters:

Shields Green (Emperor)	23 Black, unpolished.
Henry Highland Garnet	25 in first scene 42 thereafter Black, intense. Walks with aid of cane.
Frederick Douglass	26 in first scene 42 thereafter
Voice of Conductor	(scene four)
John Brown	59 White. Intense. Fiery. Carries a Bible and a pike, a lance-like weapon with a metal spear head.

Performed in one act without intermission.

Prologue and

- Scene 1: National Negro Convention, Buffalo, N.Y. 1843
 Scene 2: Rooming house, New York City. 1859
 Scene 3: Frederick Douglass's study, Rochester, same year
 Scene 4: Passenger train, one week later
 Scene 5: Chambersburg, Pa., several days later
 Scene 6: John Brown's study, same
 Scene 7: Public hall, the North, short time after

Prologue and Scene One

SHIELDS GREEN enters pushing a flatbed handcart with two lecturns which he places DOWN LEFT and DOWN RIGHT, and a WRITING TABLE which he places UP CENTER, then wheels truck to wings, as he speaks to AUDIENCE:)

Evening. I'm Emperor. You can call me Shields Green if that makes you more comfortable.

(taking AUDIENCE into his confidence)

That ain't my real name either, but—You see, I left South Carolina in sort of a hurry—

(pause as he soberly muses for a moment, then proceeds, anxious to get back to the matter at hand)

But I don't really even get into the story till later on. What I'm suppose to be telling you about is Mr. Frederick Douglass. I'm going start back in 18 and 43. That was the year of the

(with a certain pride at the event)

National Negro Convention. In Buffalo it was. A big debate amongst us Colored people. About which way we was going to go on

(deliberate)

the Slavery Question.

(DOUGLASS and GARNET enter and take their positions at the podia)

Now, in this next part I'm going to be the Chairman—Play-acting you understand.

(with possible bidden meaning)

Have to do that play-acting sometimes—Now, remember, it's 18 and 43. The National Negro Convention it was. In Buffalo, New York. That's Mr. Frederick Douglass. And there yonder is Reverend Henry Highland Garnet.

(moving into position UP STAGE)

GARNET: *(as if continuing speech)* Rise up brothers! Rise up together. Take your liberty. Now. Let the four million that you represent rise up together and end forever the days of oppression and inhumanity. Rise up and fight. Rise up together and take your liberty now! There is no other way.

(sound of enthusiastic applause of audience of less than 100)

DOUGLASS: *(in very subdued tones in contrast to GARNET)* Reverend Garnet, may I say that just our knowledge of your being the grandson of an African chief very much impresses us with your credentials as a most militant abolitionist. But if there were even a *shred* of doubt left in any of our minds as to your militancy, your clarion-call, which I dare say, is the most militant since David Walker's famous, or infamous, *Appeal*, it has removed any doubt.

(scattered supportive applause and laughter)

GARNET: Mr. Douglass, coming from so renowned a speaker, abolitionist and man of letters as yourself, I will take your last remarks as a compliment, since, judging by the tone of your retorts during our debate over the last three days, it is as close as I am going to get to a kind word from you.

(scattered supportive applause and laughter)

Douglass: *(conciliatory)* I simply suggest, as I have, and shall continue to, that the way to end slavery is to instill, in the hearts of men, a deep and wide-spread connection of the brotherhood of the human race; that God hath indeed made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.

(applause)

GARNET: In other words, Moral Persuasion, or "moral 'suasion," as it is more widely known. Trying to persuade a slaver to give up his slaves is like trying to persuade a rattlesnake to quit biting you.

(dropping all pretense of civility and becoming progressively indignant)

Mr. Douglass, may I respectfully remind you that we are all Negroes here. Must we be continually assaulted with the pacifist views of your white friend, Mr. William Lloyd Garrison?

DOUGLASS: You say Mr. Garrison is "my friend" as if that were an accusation.

GARNET: Is it an accusation to say that a house cat gives birth to kittens, not tigers?

DOUGLASS: *(more forceful)* Gentlemen, should Reverend Garnet's message reach our enslaved brethren, and its physically forceful advice be followed, its end result would be to bring about what we were called upon to avoid: further retaliatory hardship on our unfortunate counterparts.

GARNET: *(angry, above applause)* You say, "we," Mr. Douglass, but I believe when the vote of these some seventy delegates from some ten states is taken *we* will prove your Garrisonian moral 'suasion "we" is simply an intellectual's smoke screen. This is 1843, Mr. Douglass, 1843. The position of action we are about to propose here will mark the birth of a new day. It will be a day in which *we* take *our* destiny, *and that* of our enslaved brothers, into our *own* hands! I call for the vote now!

(applause, calls for VOTE, VOTE)

DOUGLASS: *(above shouts for VOTE)* At this point in our history, voluntary conversion is the way!

CHAIRMAN/GREEN: *(gavel-rapping the audience to order, then addressing them)* Gentlemen, you, as the most powerful Negro leaders in America, are about to decide the *united* policy we will preach and follow for the coming year. The choice is very distinct and clear, whether it be moral persuasion, as Mr. Frederick Douglass has so eloquently defended, or do we heed the equally eloquent Reverend Henry Garnet's call for active resistance? An aye vote is a vote for Mr. Douglass' proposal. The choice is yours. I remind you that each state delegation has a single vote. The majority rules. I will now call the role.

(begins reading names of the delegates as GARNET and DOUGLASS stand together, looking out at the audience as the vote is being taken)

GARNET: There is the possibility that my speech will be published. So no matter what happens here the word will get out.

DOUGLASS: You going to publish it yourself?

GARNET: John Brown, a wool merchant from Springfield, Massachusetts.

CLERK: *(calling roll)* Frederick Douglass.

DOUGLASS: Aye!

(to GARNET)

John Brown?

GARNET: Yes. A truly different kind of white man. Very religious. He believes in and *practices* the brotherhood of all men.

CLERK: Reverend Henry Garnet?

GARNET: Nay!

DOUGLASS: *(thinking and listening to the vote)* J.W. Loguen has also mentioned this John Brown to me. Says he's not afraid to say or do anything to end slavery.

GARNET: That describes John Brown to a T.

DOUGLASS: I would like to meet him. Can you arrange it?

GARNET: *(surprised and suspicious)* I can guarantee it'll be a waste of your time to try to convert him to your Garrison way of thought.

DOUGLASS: *(with deeper meaning)* If something is needed, and it does not exist, then it must be created.

GARNET: That is the reason there are slaves.

DOUGLASS: Exactly. And if it works one way it may work the other.

GARNET: *(puzzled)* I don't see—

GREEN/CHAIRMAN: The roll is complete. The vote is 19 ayes, 18 nays.

(the sound of YEAS and BOOS)

The ayes have it. Mr. Douglass's position has carried!

GARNET: *(bitter)* And the majority rules, even if one by a single vote. So rather than demanding our freedom, like men, the one vote majority

decides it's better to continue to *appeal* to their *consciences* and their *hearts*.

GREEN/CHAIRMAN: (*brings his gavel down with a bang. End of first scene*)

DOUGLASS and GARNET exit.

GREEN: (*during the following, moves WRITING DESK into place and wheels in flat bed truck with BOOKS and PAPERS for DESK; COAT RACK to represent the sitting room of a rooming house. He wheels cart off when finished*) That was 1843. We pick it up again now, 16 years later, 18 and 59. By this here time I'd escaped from bondage. I works for Frederick Douglass now. He says I works *with* him—I ain't been with him too long, but long enough to know a few things about him, not understand, mind you, but *know*. He's on this New York State speaking tour: Syracuse, Buffalo, White Plains, like that there. The thing he's speaking about is slavery, but I reckon you knows that, slavery being *the* hot question in the country still—

(*pauses, then laughs ironically*)

Ain't this something, me, doing, what they calls it? A recitation. In front of a audience.

(*realizing it*)

Kind of like Mr. Douglass does, I guess. I reckon it's funniest 'cause I didn't never get no chance to recite in school. But I reckon you knows that too from the way I talks. My ol' "massa" figured, like all them "ol' massas" does, ain't no sense in learning the mule to waltz, 'cause you ain't going invite him to the dance no how.

(*with mischievous grin*)

I'm dancing pretty much to my own tune now, since I left ol' massa fiddling around down in the South Carolina where he's at.

(*pause as he soberly muses for a moment, then proceeds, serious again, admonishing himself*)

What I ought to be telling about is what's been going on lately, like I was doing before I got all off the track. Let's see now. It's 18 and 59, August—

(*losing concentration again*)

—Right now, back home, they done with planting. They chopping and plowing now—

(*suddenly back to the subject*)

I reckon the biggest thing's happen lately, far's the Race be concerned, was the

(*pronouncing distinctly*)

the *Dred Scott* decision. Back in '57 it was. We still feeling the effects of that one, and *will be*. Now Mr. Douglass he could explain it better than me, with a lot fancier words and *oratory*.

(*proud of his use of the word*)

But see now, the Su-preme Court ruled that *no* Negro had *no* rights that *no* white man had to respect!

(*pause*)

No sir. No white man. Well, it didn't excite me none, 'cause that wasn't telling me nothing about the way they felt, legal or otherwise, that I hadn't knowed all along. White fellow name of Abraham Lincoln, a senator from Illinois said: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." He say, "I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free." Um hum, that's what he say. But then later on, this same white fellow turns around and says, "There is a physical difference between the ... races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of ... equality."

(*pause*)

On the floor of the senate in Washington, D.C., the representative from South Carolina beat the senator from Massachusetts near about senseless after an argument over slavery. You see some white folks takes they slavery real serious. Around the same time a slave woman named Margaret Garner escaped from Kentucky with her childrens. Made it far as Ohio. But when it looked like she could see for sure they was going to be recaptured she was able to kill one of her babies sos it wouldn't have to go back to slavery.

(*pause*)

And after she was recaptured and was on her way back, she drowned another of her youngins,

(pause)

and herself. See, Negroes takes slavery just as serious as white folks. Right now, on the open market, I'd bring in around about \$800.

(bitterly ironic)

Yeah, good buck field hand like me.

(softer and more bitter)

\$800.

(pause)

Makes me about equal to a woman with a child. They cost you around the same thing, you see. Which means right now I got at least \$800 worth of goods on a plantation in Charleston. My wife and child waiting on me to one way or another come and free them.

(looks off into the wings. Pause. Then as if acquiescing to some unspoken request)

I know you're here to be amused and not accused,

(pause)

and if I was to really go and do it up proper and give you a good picture of what's happening in the country I'd have them bring a slave out here.

(Douglass enters and stands UP CENTER. He is extremely tired)

GREEN: *(continuing, unaware of DOUGLASS)* A man whose family been sold off somewhere; or a woman whose husband run off and she don't know where or if he'll be able to get back to get her; just bring them out and let you look at them—They wouldn't have to recite or nothing—

(Douglas begins to stir. Puts his things down and look around)

GREEN: *(continuing)* But yall here more to be amused than accused, so—

DOUGLASS: *(calling, but not directly to GREEN)* Shields?

GREEN: *(pulled back from his thoughts looks around, then to audience)* Oh, there's Mr. Douglass now. I didn't even hear him come in.

(moves to join DOUGLASS)

Evening.

DOUGLASS: Evening, Shields.

(GREEN helps him remove coat)

Didn't I see you standing in the back of the hall during my speech?

GREEN: *(more cheerful)* Cheering and clapping right along with all the rest.

DOUGLASS: Why'd you leave? We could have come back together.

GREEN: I knowed that afterwards you was going to have to stand around and shake them white folks hands, and let them congratulate you for your fine speech. Wouldn't be nothing for me to do—

DOUGLASS: I don't find that part of it any more enjoyable than you.

GREEN: No sir. I got to congratulate you on that speech myself! You was sure giving it to them slavers.

DOUGLASS: Another speech, another convert. One by one by one. Figuring one or two a speech, and I'm talking about actual converts to the cause of abolition, not just those intelligent ones who nod in polite agreement, or the emotional ones who applaud; then leave, as indifferent to the slaves' plight as before; but, one or two *actual* converts, who will contribute substantial amounts of money and try to convert others. Figuring one or two of those per speech at say three, maybe four speeches a week, how long do yo think it will take to convert enough to actually gain a majority in order to *do* something about slavery?

GREEN: Well, ciphering ain't my strong suit, but, sometimes, just a few of the right folks in the right place, and at the right time can do a heap more than a whole bunch of the wrong ones.

DOUGLASS: The problem's not with them,

(the point and the cause of his mood)

but with me. Here in New York white men politely call me *Mister* Douglass. But how much of what I say or they do keeps the lash off a Mississippi slave's back?

GREEN: If it's fiery white mens you be wanting at your meetings, I reckon you better hire John Brown to follow you around.

(a joke between them)

And poor as he stay he'd probably do it for next to nothing.

DOUGLASS: *(not joining in the spirit of GREEN's comment. Searching through papers on table)* If John Brown could manage money he'd be the most valuable white abolitionist in the country.

(finding the paper he wants)

While I was looking for some notes for that Buffalo speech I found this. On the 5th of December, in the year of our lord 1800 and 46, I delivered into the hands of Hugh Auld the sum of 711 dollars and 66 cents, and he gave me this piece of paper. This declares that he gives up the *legal right* he had to own me for life. This worn and fragile piece' of paper is all that actually stands between me being a slave and a free man.

GREEN: *(after pause)* No sir, you wrong there. That piece of paper ain't got nothing to do with it.

(indicating his head)

It's what you got up here that makes you,

(with pride)

you and me both, freemens. 'Cause my mind was free long time before my body escaped and got itself free too. Just like you was free in your head before you ever got that piece of paper.

DOUGLASS: I've been at it for so many years. I've written and spoken and fought, and what have I really changed? There are still slaves!

GREEN: But everybody was a slave still ain't. Me for one. And you well know it. I was way down there in Charleston and I heard about

(with reverence)

Frederick Douglass, and all you'd done. Working off your slavery and learning all you know, and raising yourself up. And just hearing about you was probably the last little something I needed to make me take off.

DOUGLASS: But what about the rest? What about your wife?

(heavy, embarrassed pause)

Is it my destiny to just free one at a time, just as I convert one at a time?

GREEN: You just tired from all this traveling and speaking. That's all. Maybe you ought to turn in a little early. You needs your rest just like normal folks.

DOUGLASS: *(calm, but weary)* Henry Garnet was there this evening. He said he's going to stop by for a visit.

GREEN: *(chuckling)* Yall don't be visiting, yall be dueling, if you ask me.

DOUGLASS: We do have a loud friendship.

GREEN: *(to audience)* Yes sir, and he another one of them fiery ones. Him and John Brown! I'm just glad I'm on the same side they is.

(chuckling, to DOUGLASS)

A loud friendship sure covers it. And it don't do a bit more good for yall to argue then it do to ask a blind mule to set a dinner table. 'Cause neither one of yall ain't about to change your way of thinking.

DOUGLASS: *(serious)* I have changed, Shields. Over the years. And Garnet's had a great deal to do with it. Much more then I admit to him—or to myself.

GREEN: *(coming forward to audience, leaving DOUGLASS at writing table)* I reckon we done all changed. He done changed me since I been knowing him. But he was talking about Henry Garnet prodding him along. Prodding ain't the word for it. Reverend Garnet is school educated, but still hot as fox fire. One thing Reverend Garnet did do for him though, he got him together with Captain John Brown. Back in 1847 Mr. Douglass told me. I believe Captain Brown was still in the wool business then. He been in and out of so many different businesses so many different time I reckon he don't even recollect all of them hisself.

(remembering)

Another thing, too,

(HENRY GARNET enters behind him and moves to the "door")

John Brown wanted to publish Reverend Garnet's speech, the one he made at the National Negro Convention, you remember, back in '43.

(GARNET knocks on the "door")

GREEN: (calling back to DOUGLASS) I'll get it.

(to audience)

I don't think Captain Brown never did publish it though. He couldn't hardly get together enough money to feed all them 10 or 15 children of his, let alone be publishing no speeches.

(as he turns to go to door)

That were some speech though.

(he moves to door)

Reverend Garnet, I were just thinking about you.

GARNET: Emperor. How are you?

DOUGLASS: (joins them) Henry.

GARNET: Sorry about visiting so late. But I wanted to see you before I leave.

DOUGLASS: Leave?

GARNET: (slightly embarrassed) I sail for England with the morning tide.

DOUGLASS: (surprised) You deserting us too, Henry?

GARNET: (angry flash) It is not desertion.

(Pause, then calmer)

But I just couldn't pass up the chance of talking with you, for a little while anyway. Your opposition to everything I propose makes me examine what I believe. It also makes me firmer in my belief. In a roundabout way I thank you for that.

DOUGLASS: Think nothing of it.

GARNET: And I also want to compliment you.

DOUGLASS: (mock surprise) You compliment me?

GARNET: (with a somewhat mocking tone) You were preaching out there this evening, Frederick. That wasn't a milk and honey pacifist plea you were serving them, no sir! You sounded like me 8 or 9 years ago.

(laughing, good natured)

Another testament to the faith in the Lord and the power of prayer.
(into mock sermon delivery)

And I prayed! Yes I did. I prayed day and night for Brother Douglass to shake off the shackles of William Lloyd Garrison's non-resistance philosophy. And it took a whole lot of knee bending and hand wringing, but praise the Lord if it didn't pay off. The man orating tonight had fire in his eyes, and his heart, his words. He was calling for the slaves to *rise up*, he was calling for action! I heard about the speeches you've been making lately. I couldn't believe it! Not Frederick Douglass. Calling for *active resistance*? It's some impostor, I said, some wolf in sheep's clothing. But tonight I saw and heard for myself.

DOUGLASS: (matter of fact) Time comes for everything—

GARNET: (serious) You're devious, Fred. We all are, each in our way. We have to be, but you, Fred—You know what has always bothered me about you?

DOUGLASS: I knew the praise couldn't last too long. So, tell me, Henry. I am very interested in knowing.

GARNET: I have never been able to decide just how far you'll go.

DOUGLASS: Where? When?

GARNET: Whenever. Wherever.

DOUGLASS: Are you referring to a specific thing?

GARNET: I'm referring to every inconsistency and contradiction about you. Over the years, no matter how eloquent you were in defense of your position, or in opposition to mine, I have never been sure that what you were saying was what you were truly thinking and feeling. I have never understood or trusted you, Fred.

DOUGLASS: I apologize, Henry. I'm just a simple, uneducated man trying to do what I can to bring about the downfall of slavery.

GARNET: In the final hour, where will you be? In the vanguard where you belong, or erecting a pacifist stonewall across the path of our ultimate progress?

DOUGLASS: I will be where I am truly needed most.

GARNET: You are so good with words.

DOUGLASS: No better than you.

GARNET: I only hope that you don't forget there are weapons other than words.

DOUGLASS: My memories of slavery will not allow me to forget—

GARNET: (*defensive*) My mother was a slave ...

DOUGLASS: And your grandfather an African chief ...

GARNET: (*continuing*) ... she was killed trying to escape with me when I was a child. This lame leg of mine is a result of that effort.

DOUGLASS: And you grew up free.

GARNET: Yes!

DOUGLASS: And now you are going to further distance yourself.

(*pointed*)

How long did you say you were staying in England?

GARNET: (*aggressively defensive*) Here in America you have a platform, you only have a pulpit. Just as in slavery, once you've been branded a bad nigger they do whatever they can to keep you from speaking to your brothers. If I had access to the varied platforms and newspapers as you, there would be no need to go off. But, as you well know, I do not have your opportunities.

DOUGLASS: You overestimate my position.

GARNET: You have greater access and you must take greater advantage.

(*a confession, like son to father*)

You know how I have seen myself in relation to you?

(*trying to joke, but it doesn't come off*)

As a small mongrel pup nipping at your heels, hoping to keep you moving in the right direction.

DOUGLASS: More a huge pedigree loping along your own path, dragging me along behind you.

(*sincere*)

We were all changed by the speech you made at the convention year ago. Even those of us who were compelled to speak against it. Because what you were proposing, at that time, would have endangered the life of every Negro in America.

GARNET: (*outburst*) I always felt the majority of the free Negroes against me were more worried about the retaliation of the white folks on them personally than on the slaves!

(*in his passion GARNET puts too much pressure on his injured leg and almost falls. Douglass leaps forward to help him but GARNET has caught himself and waves DOUGLASS away*)

There's too much personal passion in my presentation. And I'm too strange a mixture to be detached, or admired for what I am. If I were like you; the knowledge without the education, I'd be better off. But then you've beat me to that, too. And now that I'm leaving for England I won't be here to nip at your heels, and that worries me.

DOUGLASS: Of all our differences I think the major one is our beliefs as to the role that we as "leaders" are supposed to play. I don't believe you can expect anyone to follow you if you are so far ahead of them they cannot see you. Neither are you likely to have much luck at getting behind them and pushing. But if you have a way you think they should go, go with them, beside them, amongst them, suggesting.

(*a pause as they face each other*)

GARNET: (*extends his hand to DOUGLASS*) Fred.

DOUGLASS: (*shaking GARNET's hand*) Henry.

GARNET: (*turning to GREEN*) Emperor.

GREEN: (*shaking GARNET's hand*) Good luck to you over there in England.

GARNET: And you try to keep him on the right track.

GREEN: (*nods, pause, to audience*) What to do, and how to do it?

GARNET: *(to DOUGLASS)* I'd still rather be in my position than yours. At least I can say what I feel, even if not in as many places as I'd like.

(pause. He exits)

GREEN: *(to audience as DOUGLASS turns away)* Reverend Garnet went on to England,

(begins changing position of props so they represent DOUGLASS' study in his own home)

and we go on to Ithaca and Utica and Niagara Falls and Jamestown and a couple weeks later we finally get on back home to Rochester.

DOUGLASS: *(turning back, preoccupied)* Until then I had always thought it was easier for Henry, because he was always so decisive. But it's not easy for any of us, is it, Shields?

GREEN: No, it ain't.

DOUGLASS: Sometimes there are so many issues and conditions and contradictions and voices stacked up in my mind ... Like bales of cotton waiting their turn on the scale. I have to sit very quietly, for a very long time, before I can hear Frederick Douglass' voice, or remember what *he* thinks or wants or feels. He has a conscience, too.

GREEN: *(sly and unsympathetic)* You could always go back to being a slave, let the white man decide everything for you.

DOUGLASS: Sometimes I wish I had the courage to take a step so bold and daring it would shock even Henry Garnet. Some action, no matter how violent, that would be the clarion call signalling to every Negro slave and free, that the hour to strike had come.

GREEN: I reckon if something like that was possible we'd all be willing to sacrifice ourselves to it.

DOUGLASS: But I think I've become too devious for that. I suppose that's what the little bit of learning has done to me. Perhaps that is what Henry meant.

GREEN: So, till then you just got to keep on plowing along, row by row. Just like any other man.

DOUGLASS: You're just about the only somebody, outside my wife, who knows something of me other than this cursed ability to speak, or

knows or cares there are certain foods which give me gas, that my back hurts if I stand too long—

GREEN: *(moving forward to audience)* Sometime after Reverend Garnet sailed for England, Oliver Brown, one of John Brown's sons, come on his father's business. The message was that Commander Brown had to see me and Mr. Douglass post haste. And if I knows of any man more full of anti-slavery passion than Reverend Garnet, it's John Brown. Slavery and Old Testament religion. If you ain't had your supper, don't get John Brown to talking on neither one of them subjects, or you'll starve to death.

(during the following, moves the writing desk UP CENTER, and arranges the two chairs side by side DOWN RIGHT as if they were a train seat)

The message was that Commander Brown is headquartered in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, which is right up the line from Harper's Ferry, Maryland. You know, down yonder where the government got that army arsenal. Oliver tells us that the old man's getting ready to put his guerilla plan into operation from there.

(Douglas enters)

GREEN: *(continuing)* Says he got 19 men, but didn't want to do nothing till me and Douglass gets there. *(calling to Douglass as he exits)* I'll meet you after your speech. We can go to the depot from there.

DOUGLASS: *(faces audience and begins to make speech)* We must be treated as men, responsible to our enslaved brethren. The fight must be especially persistent and constant. It is obvious the slavers are running scared, the sheer desperation of their every act only serves our cause. The battle will open on fronts we never dreamed possible. No front, no method must go untried!

GREEN: *(enters with luggage. We hear train sounds)* We got to hurry we going catch that train to Chambersburg.

(they move to "train seats," sit)

GREEN: *(after riding a moment)* What you think?

DOUGLASS: *(musing)* Oliver was rather vague about specifics—but that is John Brown's nature not to reveal any more than he has to—

GREEN: How long we planning on being in Chambersburg?

DOUGLASS: Long enough to witness the launching of his plan.

GREEN: You think it's really going to happen after all this time?

DOUGLASS: *(not a direct answer)* I remember the first time I met John Brown. I thought to myself—I thought, here is this man, this John Brown, this *white man*, radical enough to say and do things with more latitude than any Negro.

(direct, as if a confession)

So I encouraged him.

(quoting himself)

If you need something, and it does not exist, you create it.

GREEN: *(probing)* Commander Brown's talked to me before—and he wants me to join his guerilla band.

DOUGLASS: *(wanting to say more)* You told me.

GREEN: *(wanting to say more)* I just wanted to make sure you knowed.

DOUGLASS: Are you going to join him?

GREEN: Depends, I reckon. On the way things go—

VOICE OF CONDUCTOR: Chambersburg! Chambersburg! Next stop Chambersburg!

(Douglass exits with suitcases)

GREEN: *(moves to audience, deep in thought)*—It depends—"No front, no method must go untried," he said one time. *(Still deep in thought, he moves to get the writing desk and chair which he places UP RIGHT. Continuing, somewhat brighter)*

Well. He we is. And I don't mind telling you that now we're here I'm getting to feel more and more uneasy about the whole thing. Gideon's Army: 19 men and boys. Don't nobody here seem to know nothing for certain sure. Some been here a couple months already. They jokes about coming ready to die for the cause, and is now bout ready to die from boredom. To keep down suspicion amongst the neighbors hereabouts they ain't allowed outside lessen it's dark. Their nightly recreation is mostly the Old Man, Captain Brown, reading a chapter from the Old Testament.

(by this point the desk and chair are in place and he has moved to the audience)

(JOHN BROWN enters unnoticed by DOUGLASS. He is carrying a Bible and a pike. He sits at the desk and pantomimes writing a letter)

GREEN: *(continues above)* Only womens is the Old Man's 16-year-old daughter, and Oliver's wife. That situation don't do no whole lot for the men's morale neither—All in all, they plenty restless to kick off this little introductory raid, let the slavers know that the firm of John Brown and his Army of Liberation is open for business.

(he exits)

BROWN: *(reading over his letter)* Dear wife: We are safe and in good spirits.

The land hereabouts is truly an example of God's majesty. Often, while walking along in the fields, I am so overwhelmed by the beauty of it all, a hymn bursts from my throat, or I am compelled to bow my head and give thanks that he has chosen me to aid in the deliverance of the slaves. Since we have been here there have been at least four violent deaths involving our brothers in bondage.

This cause, and it alone, is great enough to separate us. Be strong in the faith. Pay no heed to my detractors. There are no failures or fools in the service of the Lord. And it is by the grace of God that I am here.

Tell each of the children to be good obedient children.

God be with you till we meet again—whether in Heaven, or on this earth.

(writing a line)

Your affectionate husband.

(satisfied, he stands)

Green enters, they embrace and exchange warm ad-libbed greetings)

BROWN: Praise the Lord, you're here.

GREEN: Yes sir.

BROWN: Where is Douglass?

GREEN: Over yonder cleaning up a bit from the trip. He'll be here directly.

BROWN: I praised the Lord for sending us such a man as Frederick Douglass. Over the years I watched him with a kind of reverent awe. I read his writings as faithfully as I read Judges. He not only gave me faith in the political beliefs I already had, but awakened me to innumerable others. He's a great man, Emperor.

GREEN: You is too, Captain Brown.

(to audience)

Not once or twice, but 30 times!, anti-free soldiers and the like has drawed a bead on him, some as close as me to him right now, and tried to bust a cap in him. And there ain't no scratch on him nowheres!

BROWN: Some of the boys here are beginning to have their doubts. I know the talk—It is not only my detractors that say I'm just an obsessed fanatic, and will fail at this, too.

GREEN: Maybe it's the crazy ones ain't obsessed with slavery's destruction.

BROWN: The instant I met him the *true* plan for the emancipation of the slaves formulated itself in my mind. He was a divine inspiration sent to me. I knew how I would use him.

GREEN: Use him?

BROWN: The final piece. The hub around which the whole wheel revolves. His presence will insure the success of this final thrust.

GREEN: You say *true* plan, and *final thrust*. I don't see—

BROWN: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might!" What my plan involves is the wiping out of slavery. We are going to capture Harper's Ferry!

GREEN: (*shocked. Speechless for a moment he turns to audience*) The original plan Douglass knows about was guerilla style.

DOUGLASS: (*enters, as if they have been in heated conversation*) To take about 25 trained guerrillas, black and white, up in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia and Maryland.

GREEN: Have raiding parties go down onto the various plantations thereabouts.

DOUGLASS: Encouraging slaves to escape.

GREEN: Strike and fall back into the mountains, which is like natural forts, where one man is worth a hundred trying to attack him.

DOUGLASS: The slaves can join with the guerrillas or flee to Canada.

GREEN: (*to BROWN*) Till after a while, you said, so many slaves'd run off till it'd deal slavery a serious blow, even if it didn't end it, you said.

BROWN: That was over 12 years ago.

DOUGLASS: It is suicide.

GREEN: (*to audience*) I can't believe the United States Army just going to let us walk in there and take over their little arsenal town.

DOUGLASS: Self-defense you said. In case you were attacked.

BROWN: We have no other choice. We never had any other choice.

GREEN: It don't make no more sense than a mustache on a mule—

BROWN: We must act now!

GREEN: (*to audience*) And yet, I listens to him, and he looks at me with them wild eyes of his and—

BROWN: The north is apathetic and the south set in its ways.

DOUGLASS: (*over*) You'll be walking straight into an armed fortress.

BROWN: (*continuing*) Elsewhere there is neutrality and silence.

DOUGLASS: (*continuing*) Trying to take over an Army Arsenal will be leading these simple farm boys into slaughter.

BROWN: (*continuing*): "I have seen the affliction of my people ... and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows."

DOUGLASS: (*over*) When did you conceive this plan?

BROWN: (*continuing*) "And I am come down to deliver them ... and to bring them up out of that land ... unto a land flowing with milk and honey ..."

DOUGLASS: Just now, or a month ago, a year, or from the beginning?

BROWN: What does that matter?

DOUGLASS: When?

BROWN: This plan was given to me.

"And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible." It is the will of God. You are as responsible for it as I am.

DOUGLASS: Are you listening to yourself? You are proposing an attack, *war!*, on the government of the United States of America. It can't succeed! It will only rouse the nation *against* our cause.

BROWN: Your speeches lately have said you were ready to welcome any new method of attack on slavery. Were those your words or were you misquoted?

DOUGLASS: (*avoiding answering*) Causing such unrest and confusion so as to disrupt the economics of slavery. That was the plan.

BROWN: That was then, this is now.

DOUGLASS: It was a good plan then and now. Hurting a man's pocketbook gets his attention faster than anything else you can do.

BROWN: I know first hand what it does to a man to break him financially!

DOUGLASS: This is not about you! The slaves here about don't even know you, or your chances of succeeding.

BROWN: They know you. Your job is to tell them!, to remove those doubts. They will rise up if *you* tell them!

DOUGLASS: I can not lend my voice to an action which will lead to the certain slaughter of my people.

BROWN: Through the years you encouraged me to be bolder and bolder. This plan is the result! With you a part of it it can't fail.

DOUGLASS: Even if you capture the Ferry, the Army won't allow you to hold it long enough for word to spread.

BROWN: Hostages will be taken. I'll threaten to kill them if the Army moves in. That will give you time to get word out.

DOUGLASS: What does the government care about *hostages*? They won't allow you to hold a government facility, I don't care *who* your hostages are. It's insanity.

BROWN: What I *do* will attract them, what you *say* will control them. It is the perfect plan, my friend. I anticipated this moment from the beginning: we, shoulder to shoulder, facing the coming challenge *together*. Like brothers.

DOUGLASS: We are not brothers in life, nor could we ever be in death.

BROWN: I used you as my gauge. Now even *you* have begun to speak about revolt. All I am asking is that you say it now, but not in some safe little Northern town hall, but from here, in the eye of the storm.

DOUGLASS: I will not allow you to use me as you see fit. Go back to your original plan, John.

BROWN: The destruction of slavery is *my duty*, as it should be for *every* man capable of raising his hand or voice against it. I hate slavery with all my heart.

DOUGLASS: You have no corner on that market. But your hatred must be intellectual at best. You have never been a slave. I have.

BROWN: It would appear that you are the intellectual, unwilling to lift the sword against the enemies of mankind and the Lord. Instead you hang back, mincing words like the mealy-mouthed abolitionists, intellectualizing in their ivory towers. Why aren't you willing to rush forward, like the mad man they say I am?

DOUGLASS: I have one goal in life; not revenge, or financial gain, or personal glorification. It is to see each and every slave free!

BROWN: It pains me to say this, but you are an opportunist; a straw man bending which ever way the wind blows.

DOUGLASS: I suggest to you that there are two kinds of insurrection: one that results in the liberty of its participants, and another which leads to their death. I haven't suffered as I have to die a martyr swinging from a federal hangman's noose.

BROWN: (*recanting, almost a plea*) But you believe in the rightness, the righteousness of it?

DOUGLASS: What I believe is not the point. The issue here is larger than one man, or emotion, or philosophy.

BROWN: And have you appointed yourself the great overseer of the anti-slavery movement?

DOUGLASS: It appointed me.

BROWN: And is it written that an appointed leader can't fight.

DOUGLASS: (*with rising anger*) I have fought. Not for a cause, but for my life. I fought Edward Covey, a slave breaker in Maryland, for-my-life. A gang of ship workers in Boston who did not want me to work on their crew, I fought them for-my-life. I fought a train crew who were trying to eject me from a coach seat I had paid for. Again, I fought them for-my-life. A mob in Indiana who did not care for a speech I made, made me fight them for my life.

BROWN: Now you won't even fight with words. Is that the price a Negro pays for becoming a free man?

DOUGLASS: When I was a slave I fought the way a slave fights, out of the necessity of it. But I am no longer a slave, I am now better able to choose my battles; the prerogative of an, at least partially, free man.

BROWN: It will never be more necessary than now.

DOUGLASS: (*ironic laugh*) How paradoxical my situation is: even though I am called a free man, I am not able to do as I will. I envy you, John Brown, you have the luxury of singlemindedness. You can determine a self-righteous goal and march as straight to it as your abilities and convictions will take you, the consequences be damned. My position as a "leader" will not allow me to encourage my people on a course of action which may very well leave them in even worse shape than before they began it.

BROWN: You do not think I am free? Do you? That I act only for myself? That I am not a slave to a master; have not tasted His lash and scorn; pleaded to Him for mercy?

(*pause, then calmer*)

Frederick, we should be making final plans, not arguing.

DOUGLASS: Damn it, John, don't you see that now, here, in this place, this time, is simply not right?

BROWN: (*beginning calmly but rising in intensity throughout*) Do you understand atonement? The sins of the world can be atoned for by my embracing the sinner's punishment? During all of my 59 years on this, God's earth, there has not been a single year during which I or my family has not smarted mightily under the rod of our Heavenly

Father. The thing I wanted most in my early life—to study for the ministry—was denied me because of an eye infection. My *entire life* has been one of denial, and fighting the work of the devil, and of atonement. A constant struggle with sickness, poverty, lawsuits; bankruptcies, death. My mother's death; my first wife's death; 9 children in childhood. In 1837 4 died within 12 days. 3 years ago in Kansas another son, a *man* of 26, was cut down in the service of the Lord by an anti-abolitionist's bullet. I have been called a fanatic, a criminal, madman, business cheat, horse thief, an intolerant Bible-quoting bully, and a self-righteous, cold-blooded killer. And do you think I have been made to suffer all that for nothing!? There is hypocrisy in the houses of the Lord, the halls of government, and throughout the land. The times and the situation compel the implementation of my plan. The Almighty, in His infinite wisdom, has provided me with the mission and the means to bring about the emancipation of the enslaved. I am his instrument! "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord!

DOUGLASS: (*direct*) Do you think you can win at Harper's Ferry?

BROWN: (*moving away from DOUGLASS to GREEN*) To win—Do we, as mortals, always understand what that means? Jesus sacrificed himself for the greater good, giving all it was possible to give. And you are willing to tell me He did not win?

DOUGLASS: Tell me you honestly believe you can succeed.

BROWN: With you beside me, yes! Now tell me you don't believe in the rightness of what is going to take place there in Harper's Ferry.

DOUGLASS: No.

BROWN: Because you can't allow yourself to? Or because you truly do not believe the justness of it?

(*Douglas is silent*)

BROWN: What if it was just you by yourself? Without the burden of your people.

(*Douglas is silent*)

BROWN: Otherwise you would be with me. And with God who brought me to this, my final test. And he will not allow me to fail this time.

DOUGLASS: But what about the others? Your sons? Those other young boys out there? Are you willing to sacrifice them?

BROWN: It is not a sacrifice. They believe in me. I will not fail them. And they will not forsake me—as you have—

(bitter)

You encouraged me, and then at the final hour you desert.

(sudden thought)

Is this another test, Lord?

(to DOUGLASS, suspicious)

Is this what you intended all along? Are you that calculating?

(rushing, confused)

But even if you are, and you meant for it to come to this, why won't you join now and insure its success?

(with desperation, to fight his confusion and regain his confidence)

God is my judge. God, and only God. And I have only Him to answer to. Come and pray with me.

(Douglass remains standing, as BROWN, using the pike staff to support and steady himself kneels to one knee and looks up at DOUGLASS. With a sudden strong gesture he reaches up and grasps DOUGLASS' wrist and almost pulls him to his knees. With one hand still grasping the pike and the other holding DOUGLASS' arm, BROWN lowers his head in prayer)

And the Lord looked upon Gideon, and said, 'Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?' And he said unto him, 'Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor ..., and I am the least in my father's house.' And the Lord said unto him, 'Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.'

(pause. They rise and BROWN and DOUGLASS stand facing each other. BROWN offers the pike to DOUGLASS)

DOUGLASS: That is your weapon, John. I must live to aid my brothers. If you feel you must die to do it well—I can't stop you.

(turns to GREEN)

BROWN: *(forceful and bitter)* Emperor is going to join me.

DOUGLASS: *(to GREEN)* I'm going to leave for Rochester as soon as you can get our things together.

GREEN: *(moves to a position between them, favoring BROWN)* I think I'll go on with the Commander from here.

DOUGLASS: Welcome to Gideon's Army, Emperor.

(offers the pike)

(Green pauses a moment. Takes pike)

BROWN: A man who makes a decision and doesn't flip-flop like a landed fish.

GREEN: *(to DOUGLASS)* I got to go back, just like I had to leave in the first place.

DOUGLASS: *(understanding)* We must choose.

GREEN: Like they says, A man who's meant to hang won't drown.

(smiles, trying to lighten the mood)

Maybe I'll even meet up with my old master—And get back what he's got that belong to me.

(shrugs)

It's worth the chance.

(they shake hands warmly)

DOUGLASS: I'm going John.

(sincere)

Your God be with you—

(he turns to exit)

BROWN: *(to DOUGLASS for benefit of GREEN)* You go!

(DOUGLASS stops at the tone and looks back at him)

BROWN: Be safe and cautious!

(sarcastic)

Intellectual!

(DOUGLASS turns)

BROWN: Maybe someday you'll be *Ambassador* Douglass, or *Congressman* Douglass, or *Senator* Douglass.

(DOUGLASS exits)

BROWN: (*calling after DOUGLASS*) "And when Gideon perceived that he was *an angel of the Lord*,...the Lord said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou *shalt not die*."

(*moving toward DOUGLASS' point of exit*)

I will protect you! I-will-not-let-anything happen to you! I CAN GUARANTEE THAT!! BY GOD I CAN!!

(BLACK.)

(*we hear gun shots and screams of the wounded during short blackout*)

EPILOGUE

(*the tune John Brown's Body is playing softly*)

DOUGLASS: (*enters carrying a telegram. He looks rumpled and worried. He takes his place at speaker's dias*) Here is the latest word from Harper's Ferry: as of yesterday morning, 17 October, 1859, John Brown and his men had seized the United States Armory and had control of all points of entry and exit to the Ferry. But by today, a company of U.S. Marines, led by

(*consulting the telegram as lights reduce to a spotlight*)

Colonel Robert E. Lee had arrived, overpowered the rebels, and taken control—

(*bells toll throughout in contrast to the tune, which continues*)

One United States Marine—killed.

Four inhabitants of Harper's Ferry—killed.

Of Commander John Brown's band, 7 escaped, and 10 killed—including 2 of Commander Brown's sons.

Commander himself was captured along with 4 of his men.

(BLACK.)

(*spot immediately on DOUGLASS making a speech as music and bells continue*)

John Brown, tried and found guilty of treason, was hung this morning, December 2, 1859; along with Shields Green, also known as Emperor, and others.

I personally, and the abolitionist cause generally, have lost perhaps our truest friend, and most devoted advocate. John Brown did not fail at Harper's Ferry, he took a step, a very necessary step. And by taking that step he has, almost single-handedly redramatized the plight of the slaves in the South. Through his dramatic action our consciences are once again concentrated on the misfortunes of our enslaved brethren.

Now is the time for us to *collectively* take up the torch from his fallen hand and move forward together. For it is not he who begins, but he who endures that is victorious.

(*four-beat pause, then BLACK and end of play*)